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KOHUT'S EDITION OF 'NATHAN THE WISE'.

Nathan the Wise. A dramatic poem by GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING. Translated from the German by PATRICK MAXWELL. Edited, with an Introduction, comprising a Biographical Sketch of the Author, a Critical Analysis of the Poem, and an Account of the Relation between LESSING and MOSES MENDELSSOHN, by GEORGE ALEXANDER KOHUT. New York: BLOCH PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1917. pp. 388.

It was Goethe—so wonderfully prolific in such suggestions—who advised that every year we should renew acquaintance with our treasures of art, if we would retain our love of beauty and appreciation of what is highest and best. Merely to possess choice etchings or priceless gems and paintings is not enough—they must be brought closer to us, and studied with rapt devotion from time to time, if art and knowledge are to fulfil their mission.

The suggestion has a wide application, especially in the domains of religion and literature, which are apt to prove of secondary value unless they become more than merely reminiscent. So far as Judaism is concerned, the Mosaic Code anticipated the sage of Weimar by insisting that the Law was to be 'actualized' in each day's record. The daily identification of Israel with statutes and ordinances, which were 'our life and the prolongation of our days', had only one purpose in view, to translate religion into life and life into religion. Our Law in its broader sweep and later development was practically pedagogic. It was never meant to be like a cold storage product to be taken out of its cell mechanically at certain intervals and then to be returned once more to darkness and silence. It was felt that the daily association with symbols would inspire ethical ideals, as has been proved in the lengthening centuries of Jewish history.

In its application to literature, Goethe's counsel has perennial

force, and 'Nathan the Wise' is a notable case in point. That drama is a costly jewel not for the cabinet alone. It must be taken from its shelf at regular intervals, and carefully studied as one of those precious gifts which enrich mankind and ineffably promote the consciousness of our common humanity—one in character, if varied in characteristics.

Dr. Kayserling, in his enlarged and revised biography of Mendelssohn (1888), which was first issued twenty-five years earlier, devotes one of his divisions to Lessing, and tells the story of his famous drama and its close relationship to its author's friend of thirty years' intimacy. He shows, too, how the ambitious 'Der Jude', written in enthusiastic youth, developed into 'Nathan the Wise'; he compares that work as a life-composition to Goethe's Faust, begun in youth and completed in old age. Kayserling, despite his penchant for flowing eulogy rather than cool criticism, gives a mass of interesting details as to character and incidents, referring to the zeal with which the drama has been studied and the striking parallels brought from Jewish and other sources.

It is idle, save to gratify the moment's curiosity, to search for parallels in the analysis of such a masterpiece. Truth is universal—the intuitions of genius are never local, depending upon soil formation or the trade winds. Why should not anticipations and repetitions of thoughts be found in the ethical sayings of nations and creeds? Who best tells a truth makes that truth his own. The origin of a thought is less to be considered than its practical influence. The ever-recurring question of Lessing's indebtedness for the parable of the three rings need not unduly puzzle the reader. He refers to Boccaccio as his source¹—his own inventiveness did the rest. Some see parallels elsewhere which are more or less satisfactory, but such resemblances, real or fancied, may occur unconsciously or unaccountably. As a librarian Lessing was at home among books, and would not have hesitated to give more definite data had it been necessary.

It was a happy thought of George A. Kohut, whose taste and

¹ Kayserling, p 340; Kohut, p. 25.

scholarship have already been evidenced in the world of literature, to issue a Lessing book at this, of all eras in history when mankind needs to be reminded of its essential brotherhood, however hopeless seem the task to many of us with limited vision. Making Maxwell's translation, issued originally in London, the volume's nucleus, he has added a readable introduction, with ample notes and illustration, which give the book a distinction and quality of its own. The publishers have aided in the necessary details of binding and typography. Mr. Kohut is an entertaining as well as scholarly editor, and has admirably condensed his information from the sources. Hence his edition is indispensable to lovers of literature in general and students of Lessing in particular, in these days of world strife and vanishing ideals, when we all need the spur and solace of 'Nathan the Wise'.

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